

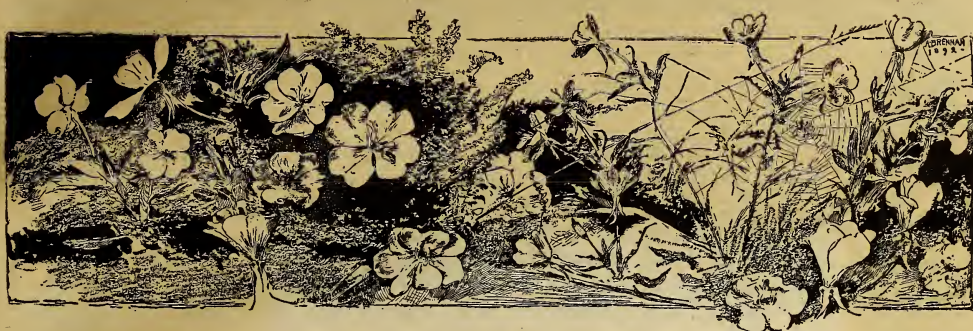
THE HARPER IN THE WOOD

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.



THE HARPER IN THE WOOD

A LEGEND OF WALES

BY ALICE HEGAN RICE

Author of "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch," "Mr. Opp," etc.

UP in the Welsh Mountains, hid away in a deep ravine of the Lledr Valley is the far-famed Fairy Glen. Here the turbulent river Conway comes plunging over resisting boulders and mossy stones to meet its brother river the Llugwy in the valley below. Each season hundreds of tourists leave the highway to toil up the wood-path for a glimpse of the seething waters, the verdant forest, and the wildly picturesque Glen.

About half-way up the steep ascent the traveler was wont to hear, above the dashing of falling waters, and the wind in the tree-tops, the deep vibrant notes of a harp. Out of the wood it came, out of the dim, cool bowers that held their virgin solitude. At first it seemed so much a part of the voices of wind and water that one could scarcely be sure it was a human instrument; but gradually out of the harmony came a faint melody, the plaintive notes of an old Welsh folk-song, sum and substance of the soil that gave it birth.

Presently the strains grew more insistent, and the traveler came upon a little vine-clad shelter, like a sentinel's box, standing beside the pathway. Sitting before it, his head thrown back, and a pair of luminous gray eyes confidently yet

strangely lifted to the light, a young Welsh lad played upon his harp, his lean, sensitive face responsive to every note, as his slender fingers unhesitatingly sought the desired strings.

Attached to the shelter was a small box with the printed inscription, "Blind from Childhood," and into this the chance passer-by, pausing involuntarily, dropped his penny, and then passed on.

To the thoughtful it was evident that the green bower in the hillside, saturated as it was with the sounds of falling waters, of bird songs, and the wistful strains of the harp, had acquired an atmosphere of peace and depth, such as comes where a lonely soul has lived and loved and suffered.

When old Ivor Kyffin, the shepherd, was himself gathered into the fold, the little blind son, left alone in the rude stone cabin on the mountain, had been gladly adopted by the kindly village folk. The ardent love and veneration of the Welsh for poetry made them eagerly welcome the little lad from the hills, who held within his frail body the priceless gift of song. They ministered to his simple needs and vied with each other in kindnesses, and in return Evan poured out his gift for them

III

Oh, when I make my plea before our God,
I shall not boast my sufferance and pain,
The whirlwind snows that blinded on the plain,
The smoke I breathed, the lava-fields I trod,
With head unhooded and burning feet unshod,
Nor fettered hours in Houses of Disdain,
With anarch Ignorance and Custom vain,
Nor strength achieved by bowing to the rod.

But I shall boast, O Bride forever bright,
Forever young (with blossoms from the glade,
The hill, the lake I crown thee mistress of),
Delight, delight, and evermore delight,
The hearth I kindled and the boat I made,
And quiet years as minister of love.

IV

So when I make my boast before the throne,
I shall not mention what was mine of praise,—
The silver cup for swiftmess in the race,
Nor bossed medals stamped with name my own
For Turk or Tartar in palestra thrown,
Nor bells that pealed my battles in old days,
Graved scrolls with civic seals, nor public bays
For the deep thoughts I carved in bronze and stone.

But I shall name, O lyric Life, thy name;
Show the proud tokens, the ring, the odorous hair,
Love's fiery print upon my lips and eyes;
And strip my bosom as 't were a thing of fame,
And say, "This glorious Lady slumbered there,
And made these arms her earthly paradise."



freely. In their times of sorrow, and times of glee at the Eisteddfods¹ and funerals it was his voice and harp that strove earnestly to reflect the mood and express the emotions of the simple village folk.

But as he grew to manhood the desire for independence woke within him, and he chafed at his inability to do his man's share in the work of the world. It was then that old Hugh Owen, the carpenter, built him the shelter in the wood, and found the means for him to earn his daily bread.

For five long summers he sat playing by the roadside, aware of the passing feet but taking little heed of them, glad sometimes of a child's laugh, or a word of passing cheer, but for the most part completely absorbed in a world of his own.

He was a poet, and the song rose in him as the sap rises in the young tree in the spring. Without color, or form, or visible motion the earth was still beautiful to him. He smiled out into the darkness, and sang as the birds sing for very joy of living.

As he sat there, day after day, in the sunshine and the rain, with the music in his soul, something of the sweetness of the still wood, and the mystery of the sunlight became inwoven in his very being. It was as if Nature played upon him, as he played upon his harp, tuning the subtle strings of his sensitive soul, making him responsive to her moods and the moods of her children.

Without teachers, without guidance, he sought and found the highest life can give, in the silence of the wood, in the depths of his own soul, and in the gentle humanity that lies in the hearts of men.

Yet a very human craving at last took possession of him, a longing that would not be stilled.

As he sat one day in the warm luxury of the noonday sun, his hands dropped listlessly, and he sighed. Again and again he had told himself that he must not dream of love, that he must only sing of it, and know it through the joys of others, but he had not counted on the possibility of a rebellious heart.

Voices from the path below made him quickly raise his head. The sound of

laughter and lively chatter told him that a band of village boys and girls were on their way to a merrymaking over beyond the Pont-y-Bryn.

In an instant he was all eagerness to go, as alert as a young hound who sees his master start for the hunt. He rose to put his harp under the shelter, but paused; the way was long and rough, and the sudden fear of being a burden held him back.

"Give us a reel, Evan, lad!" called one of the boys as the noisy crowd trooped up the hillside.

"We 'll dance here on the turf, and lighten our feet for the rest of the journey."

Evan once more drew forth his harp, and struck up a lively air. As he played he could hear the shuffling of feet on the grass, and the merry exclamations of the dancers. His own foot tapped the time, and his body swayed, but he was not thinking of the dance. He was listening, as only the blind can listen, for the sound of one voice in the crowd, the voice of Gladdwyd Owen.

Evan knew that where the jest was merriest and the laughter the gayest, there was Gladdwyd. He knew that her hand had been the first one claimed for the dance, and that every boy in the village sought her smile. He knew that for him she was as some nymph in the wood of whom he dreamed, some beautiful intangible, elusive presence, that tormented and enchanted him. He knew above all that he was but Evan Kyffin the blind harper in the wood, and yet he dreamed.

A flower was brushed across his cheek, as some one dropped breathlessly on the bench beside him.

"There 's hot I am!" exclaimed Gladdwyd's voice, "I 'll dance no more. Let me play, Evan!"

With mischievous fingers she swept the strings, and as she leaned past him, he could feel her soft hair brush his face.

"I wish thou wert going, Evan," she said impulsively as the dancing came to a sudden end. "There 's not one of us but would guide thee, right willingly."

He smiled straight before him but shook his head.

"I 'll keep to my harp, Gladdwyd. But

¹ *Eisteddfod* (literally "a sitting of learned men") is the annual musical and literary festival, which is a survival of the early triennial assemblies of the Welsh bards.

it will make the day less long to know thou wilt miss me."

"But thou 'lt wait for us, then, until we come back in the evening time?"

Still Evan smiled. "I 'll wait for *thee*, Gladdwyd," he said.

When they were gone the wood seemed very still. He had held his breath to catch every word of the revelers until they were lost in the distance. Now he rose and paced up and down the path, and the youth in him cried out in protest against his blindness. He longed to run and leap and be free, free to see the world he lived in, free to live and love like other men.

But even as these thoughts tormented him, he lifted his head to breathe more fully the warm, scented air laden with the garnered treasure of wild flowers and meadow grass, and to catch the elusive note of a distant unknown bird.

He dropped beside his harp and eagerly sought to capture the strain. It was one of his joys to think that he was giving expression to the dumb things that could not speak for themselves, that his harp spoke the meaning of the wind, the inarticulate song of the little nameless weeds and grasses that strove vainly to lift their tiny voices. So ardently did he crave the power of sight, that his heart leaped forth in instant sympathy to anything, animate or inanimate, that could not hear, and sing, and see.

What would the vision be, he wondered, could a flash of sight be given him? It was twenty years since he had seen the sun, and though memory treasured each shape and color that was left by the obliterating years, yet he longed passionately for one moment of reassurance.

As one lies in the darkness at night and dreams of the coming light, so Evan sat in the darkness and dreamed of the light that was gone.

Again and again the sound of passing feet and the dropping of a penny in the box told of the presence of a stranger, but Evan played on, unaware of the world and of the flight of time. He was lifting up his heart to God, as a child brings its gift without explanation or apology, and lays it in the lap of one it loves.

After a time he opened his small lunch basket, and ate his barley bread and cheese. A thrush fluttered to his knee, then hopped to the tips of his fingers, daintily picking

the crumbs from the palm of his hand. He felt the sensitive quiver of the tiny body, and knew that the wings were poised for flight. It would go, as all else went, on, on, out into the great, free world, leaving him there alone.

All afternoon he played patiently on. The passing of the minutes and the passing of the hours were one to him, except where Gladdwyd was concerned.

He waited for her now, playing softly, lest he should fail to catch the first sound of her voice. But no shouts and noisy chatter came to tell him of the return of the merry-makers.

The twilight twitter of the sleepy birds as they settled down for the night, and the stirring of the leaves by the cool, evening breezes, might have warned Evan that the day was done. But Gladdwyd had bidden him wait and the hope of going down into the village, even that bit of a way, with the glad, noisy crowd, and of walking beside Gladdwyd, with her hand perhaps in his, made him straighten his tired shoulders, and flex his cramped fingers, and play patiently on. Hour after hour he waited, while the evening dropped into night and darkness stole over the world as it had long ago stolen over his sight. The dew fell upon the faces of the upturned flowers, and a single star shone out from the branches of a sentinel spruce, but Evan could not hear the falling of the dew nor the dawning of the star, and it was still day to him until he should hear Gladdwyd's voice coming down the mountain side.

Wearier and wearier grew the waiting, and at last his fingers faltered on the strings, and he sat with his head drooped against his harp, and his sightless eyes turned patiently toward the hillside.

Suddenly a faint cry made him turn his head to listen. It was a cry he had often heard when a child, tending the sheep with his father on the moors of Galt-y-Foel, the cry of a young lamb in distress.

Placing his harp in the shelter and seizing his stick, he started valiantly up the hill. The path going down to the village he knew, as the chipmunk knows his, though it be covered with the leaves of many autumns: he knew where the boughs bent over the pathway, how the rocks jutted out at the turn of the hill, and when one must put a hand against the

cliff and walk close to the granite wall. But up above there, toward Fous Nod-dum, where the footsteps were always going, lay a strange, unknown world, and he must feel each step of the way and be guided by the cries of the lamb.

That the little creature had strayed and was hurt was evident to him, and the cries, coming apparently from the same spot, made it probable that it was caught in the rocks and unable to free itself.

At the top of the hill the path turns sharply to the right and descends abruptly, by stepping-stones, around huge boulders and twisted tree trunks to the chasm below.

Evan called out to see if, by chance, there was any one in the ravine, but no answer came. He paused irresolute. It was a steep climb for one who could see, and for one who was blind it was fraught with peril.

The bleating of the lamb came to him above the roar of the waters, and the big heart of him and the strong hands of him went out instinctively to succor the helpless.

Dropping to his knees, he began laboriously crawling down from step to step, cautiously feeling each foot of the way, and pausing again and again to get his direction from the cries below. The brambles scratched his face, and the sharp pebbles cut his hands. Once the ground crumbled beneath his foot, loosening a boulder which went plunging from ledge to ledge until it splashed in the water below.

As the cries sounded nearer, the stepping-stones ceased, and the path growing wider, became less easy to define. It no longer descended but seemed to run along the edge of the stream, and Evan felt the stones wet beneath his hands.

Pausing uncertainly, he was aware of something struggling near-by.

Not daring to leave the path without a guide, he felt along the bank until his hand touched a mass of trailing ivy. Tying several branches together he fashioned a rope, which, secured to the bank at one end, and held by him at the other, served as a guiding line with which he fearlessly waded out into the shallow stream.

A few steps brought him to the object of his search. The lamb had evidently strayed into the Glen from the peat bog

above and, following the course of the stream, had been caught in the rocks.

"What a *baich* of fear thou art!" said Evan as he knelt to release the captive, and tenderly felt over its body to make sure there were no broken bones. "'T was a narrow escape," he added, "Didst think, indeed, thy hour was come?"

For answer the lamb shivered against his warm, dry coat and buried its head beneath his arm.

The retracing of his steps to the path was simple enough, but the ascent with his burden was not so easy. Twice on the way his sense of direction forsook him, and it was some moments before he could make sure of his way.

When nearly to the top the lamb struggled in his arms, and Evan stopped.

"Thou too!" he said, loosening his hold, and smiling wistfully, "thou wouldst go on thy way, like all the rest, and leave me!"

The lamb leaped from his arms, and as Evan put forth a hand to steady himself by the wall, the earth seemed suddenly to crumble beneath his feet, and with a crash he plunged face downward over the edge of the rocky path to the narrow ledge below.

For seconds it may have been, or hours, he lay here before anxious voices, calling through the dusk of the wood, broke the silence.

"Evan!" they called; "Evan!" and one among them more appealing than the rest, and coming nearer, "Evan, lad!"

He stirred, half conscious, and opened his eyes. It was the voice he had waited for these weary hours, but he could not remember whose it was.

Anxious and fearful it came again, on the path directly above him. But the numbness closed upon him, before he could answer.

"Evan!" it pleaded, and this time it seemed to arouse his stupefied senses.

Summoning all his strength he sent it into the one cry: "Gladdwyd!"

In a moment she had scrambled down the rocks and was on her knees beside him.

"Evan, lad! Evan! What has happened to thee? What art thou doing lying here in the dark?"

"Is it dark?" he asked faintly, smiling up into the night, and quieting her trembling hand in his as he had often

soothed a frightened bird. "Where are we, lass?"

"On the Glen path, where thou must have fallen. But thou art hurt; I must call the others!"

His fingers tightened about her hand. "I—I waited for thee, Gladdwyd."

"Yes, lad, but we came down the Capel way. All the while I cooked the porridge for supper I watched for thy passing, and when thou didst not come, I could not rest. 'N'wncwl John and Father are searching the woods for thee now."

"And thou camest to seek me?" asked Evan tenderly. "Thou carest enough—enough for that?"

With a half-sob she laid her hand upon his arm. "Come, Evan, I will help thee; try to rise."

But he groaned with pain as she attempted to lift him.

"No! No!" he cried in anguish, "I cannot move, something crushes me here," and he lay his hand on his chest.

Gladdwyd started up in terror. "I will

go for Father," she cried, "his light is flashing now through the trees."

But Evan turned his face to her beseechingly:

"Wait with me, here," he pleaded. "It's not for long."

Tenderly she lifted his head to her lap and sat waiting fearfully until the moving lights should come near enough for her father to hear her call.

Presently Evan stirred and moaned, then suddenly a flash of joyous wonder overspread his face.

"It's beautiful, it is!" he murmured breathlessly, "all beautiful now. Life—and—love—and death."

THE years have passed, but the weather-beaten little shelter, with its pathetic inscription yet legible above the penny-box, may still be seen on the path that leads to Fous Noddum. But it is only a place for the birds and squirrels now, and no vibrant harp notes mingle with the music of the Glen.



HIGHLAND JOY

(WALES)

BY CALE YOUNG RICE

THE bluebells ring in the bracken,
The heather bells on the hill;
The gorse is yellow,
The sunlight mellow
With music of wind and rill.

Afar the mountains are rising,
High Snowdon and all his knights,
For some fair tourney
With clouds that journey
Up from the sea's blue bights.

O winds, O waters, O mountains,
O earth with your singing sod,
I'm glad of the weather
That brings together
My heart and the heart of God!

